

Trail System Planning, with Specific Reference to Provincial Parks in Ontario*

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Abstract

With the increasing number of rails-to-trails, regional trail networks and the Trans Canada Trail, park professionals and academics have identified the need for a provincial trail systems plan. This plan would provide a "systematic approach" of identifying trails with the objective of creating a balanced system of interpretive and recreational trails. This paper discusses the need for a trail systems plan for the provincial parks system and how this plan may be applied to the existing provincial network of trails.

An inventory of each park's themes and trails was conducted to determine if the trails in Southeastern Zone parks were representative of their park's respective natural and cultural heritage themes. In turn, the inventory contributed towards a thematically balanced zone trail system. This analysis revealed that only half of park trails were representative of park themes identified in each park's management and Natural Heritage Education (NHE) plans.

The paper concludes by identifying opportunities and initiatives to enable a more coordinated and systematic approach to planning, developing, managing and funding trails in Provincial Parks and Ontario.

Introduction

Over the last 100 years numerous recreational trails have been developed in Ontario, particularly in Provincial Parks, but also in National Parks, Conservation Areas, rural areas and municipalities (MacPherson 1997). While there may have been an explicit reason for establishing most of these trails, and they may have provided numerous recreational opportunities, the process of trail development has tended to be uncoordinated, certainly for the province as a whole, but also within specific regions and agencies, such as Ontario Parks. Furthermore, there has often been a lack of systematic planning of trails even within individual protected areas, such as Provincial Parks.

It now seems desirable to plan trails in Ontario, and in individual protected areas, in a more systematic and coordinated fashion. This is so for a variety of reasons including:

- trails may be expensive to develop and maintain;
- trail use is increasing;
- trails of various types and levels of use may have environmental impacts;

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- some existing trails may not be in the best locations;
- new trails are probably needed in new locations;
- trails in individual protected areas, or under the jurisdiction of a specific agency have usually not been linked to trails in other areas;
- existing trails may not expose users to the full range of environments and historical features of the province;
- there seems to be considerable duplication of some, and a neglect of other topics interpreted on trails;
- the lack of a province-wide system of trails, and long distance trails inhibits multi-day trail use, and the potential for tourism associated with this; and,
- the public is confused about the trails available to them, the appropriate uses, charges for use and so on.

A variety of recent initiatives (Marsh 1994) have also necessitated a more coordinated approach to planning, developing, and paying for trails in Ontario. These include:

- the interest in, and financial support for, a system of snowmobile trails throughout the province;
- the availability of numerous abandoned railway lines for acquisition and use as trails;
- the planning and development of the Trans Canada Trail through Ontario;
- the concept of a Trillium Trail Network in Ontario;
- the availability of some government and non-government funding to develop new trails;
- the need to generate revenue for trails, perhaps through a Trillium Trail Pass in Ontario;
- the increasing interest in developing and marketing trails for tourism; and,
- the increasing interest in ecological corridors, or greenways, to connect protected areas.

A Systematic Approach to Planning Trails in Ontario

A more systematic and coordinated approach to the planning of trails in Ontario will require:

- a regularly updated inventory of existing trails in the province, such as that initiated by Hike Ontario;
- the maintenance of the inventory in a Geographical Information System that can produce up to date maps, at various scales, as required;
- the identification of gaps in the trail system and potential new trails;
- the identification of potential ecological corridors that could link protected areas, and contain trails;
- an assessment of which environmental and historical features can be seen and interpreted along existing trails, and which cannot be seen unless new trails are developed in certain places;
- the recognition of a hierarchy of trails, including strategic routes across the province, trails linking parks, regionally significant trails, and local feeder trails;
- an assessment of the recreational and tourist demand for trails, especially new trails; and,
- the matching of the supply of various trails with the demand for various trails.

The planning, development, and management of a hierarchical system of trails throughout the province and linking parks would be assisted by:

- the development by the provincial government of, and widespread support for an Ontario Trails Policy;
- more comprehensive policies and plans for trails in provincial parks, and more funding to implement them;
- the continued leadership of the Ontario Trails Council, and more funding for its work on this;
- a larger and more representative membership in the Ontario Trails Council, including a representative of Ontario Parks;
- a greater recognition of the tourism potential of trails, especially in tourism planning and promotion; and,
- more research on trails, trail users, and trail benefits in the province.

Trail Planning in Provincial Parks

A Trail Systems Plan for Ontario Parks

Ontario provincial park trails provide for a number of diverse recreational opportunities and heritage appreciation experiences. Several regional trails also go through parks, such as the Rideau Trail and Waterfront Trail in southeastern Ontario. The development of provincial park trails, however, has evolved in an unsystematic or ad hoc fashion with no methodology in place to ensure representativeness of natural and cultural heritage themes or balanced recreational opportunities. The establishment of provincial legislation and provincial park trail policy would greatly assist the development and protection of a balanced system of trails within Ontario.

A provincial trail systems act would provide a foundation for the development of a province-wide trail system. Legislation could outline different categories of trails, such as recreation and historic, an administrative agency, selection criteria and management policies. Legislation could also help external agencies, such as municipal governments and trail associations, as well as private landowners, to become actively involved in the development and management of trails.

A trail planning and management policy for provincial parks would also provide direction for park personnel to develop a system of trails with common standards. Standards of excellence in routing, construction, signage, and maintenance should be core components of such a trail policy.

A trail systems plan would meet the four objectives of Ontario Parks, namely Protection, Recreation, Heritage Appreciation and Tourism (OMNR 1992). Trails serve as a management tool to help control distribution and intensity of use and to avoid undesirable impacts on natural and cultural values while providing access to a variety of park landscapes. Trails also provide recreational opportunities, such as hiking, mountain biking, and cross country skiing, to park visitors. Opportunities for exploration and appreciation of the province's natural and cultural heritage are also facilitated by park trails. An Ontario Parks trail system would also be a strong component of a tourism strategy to attract domestic and international visitors to explore a diverse range of recreational and interpretive park trails.

In addition to meeting Ontario Parks four objectives, a trail systems plan would achieve all nine guiding principles of the provincial park system: Permanence; Distinctiveness; Representation; Variety; Accessibility; Coordination; System; Classification; and, Zoning (Ontario Parks 1992).

Similar to Ontario Parks' systems plan for establishing targets to represent the earth science, life science, cultural resources and recreational opportunities of the province, a trail systems plan would help to achieve a balanced representation of natural and cultural heritage themes and recreational pursuits. An integral component of this plan would be an identification methodology or gap analysis to assess the current state of thematic representation of trails in the park system. Geological, biological and historical frameworks that were developed by the Ministry of Natural Resources in the early 1980s would be useful in preparing a trail systems plan (Beechey 1980; Davidson 1981; OMNR 1975).

To ensure regional representativeness of natural and cultural themes and to a lesser extent, recreational opportunities, a trail systems plan should be developed for each of Ontario Parks' six administrative zones (Figure 1). Each provincial park's trail plan would then be able to achieve zone targets set out in this systems plan.

Provincial Park Trail Plans

A provincial park's management plan defines the park's role, significance and classification in the context of the provincial system. The plan states the policy, including classification and zoning and addresses the protection, planning, development and management of significant resources in the park. The development policy section of the management plan identifies the development concepts and improve-

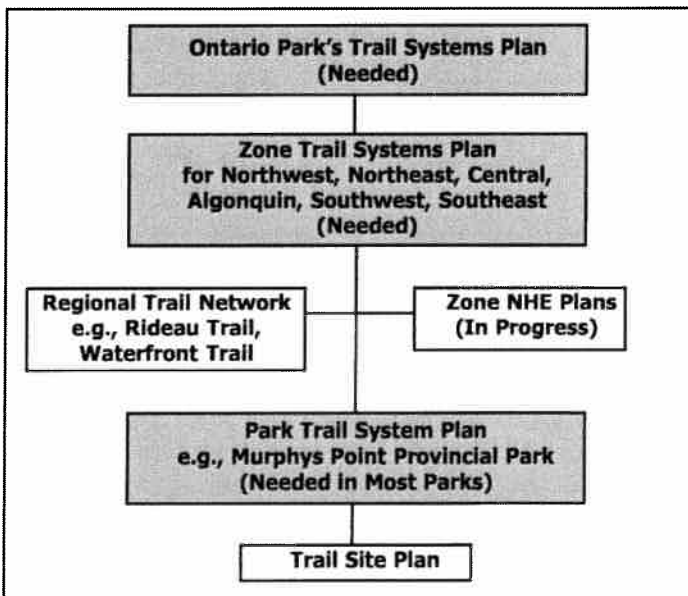


Figure 1: Ontario Parks Trail Systems Plan Framework

ments to trails in a park. Subsidiary plans, such as Resource Stewardship Plans and Park Operating Plans provide further direction for proper management and visitor services associated with trails (Figure 2). In most cases once these plans have been completed a park trail plan can be developed.

Before a trail plan can be prepared, sufficient inventories of natural and cultural resources, as well as recreational opportunities, should be conducted. This will have taken place prior to management planning for the park. A park trail plan should identify the following:

- targets and objectives achieved in the zone trail system plan;
- goal of the trail system and role each trail plays in the park;
- trail objectives in representing the park's interpretive themes and recreational activities which are often identified in the park's Natural Heritage Education (NHE) plan;
- management prescriptions and planning alternatives for trails within the park and links to other trails outside of the park;
- interpretive media and signage;
- trail marketing strategy; and,
- implementation schedule for trail development and improvements to existing trails

In addition, the trail plan should look outside the boundaries of the park and identify co-operative planning relationships with regional trail associations and local tourism boards.

In summary, the implementation of a park trail system plan is the most important component of the provincial park trail planning process, since it provides the foundation for a well maintained and managed system of trails across the province.

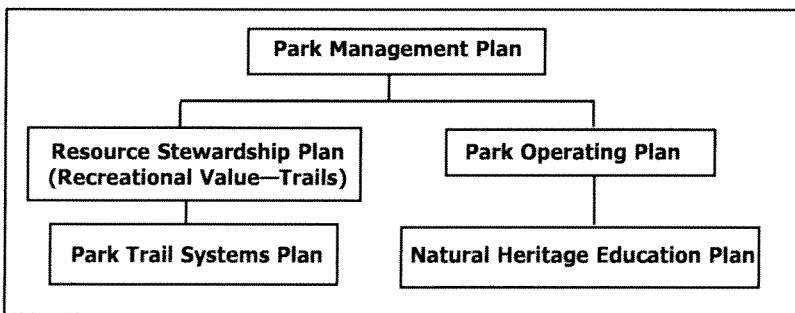


Figure 2: Park Trail System Plan Framework

Examination of Ontario Parks Trails in the Southeastern Zone

The Southeastern Zone of Ontario Parks is situated south of Algonquin Provincial Park and extends from Oshawa to the Ontario/Quebec border (Figure 3). There are 31 parks in the zone, 21 of which are operating parks. Some of the more notable parks in the zone include: Presqu'île; Petroglyphs; Sandbanks; Bon Echo;

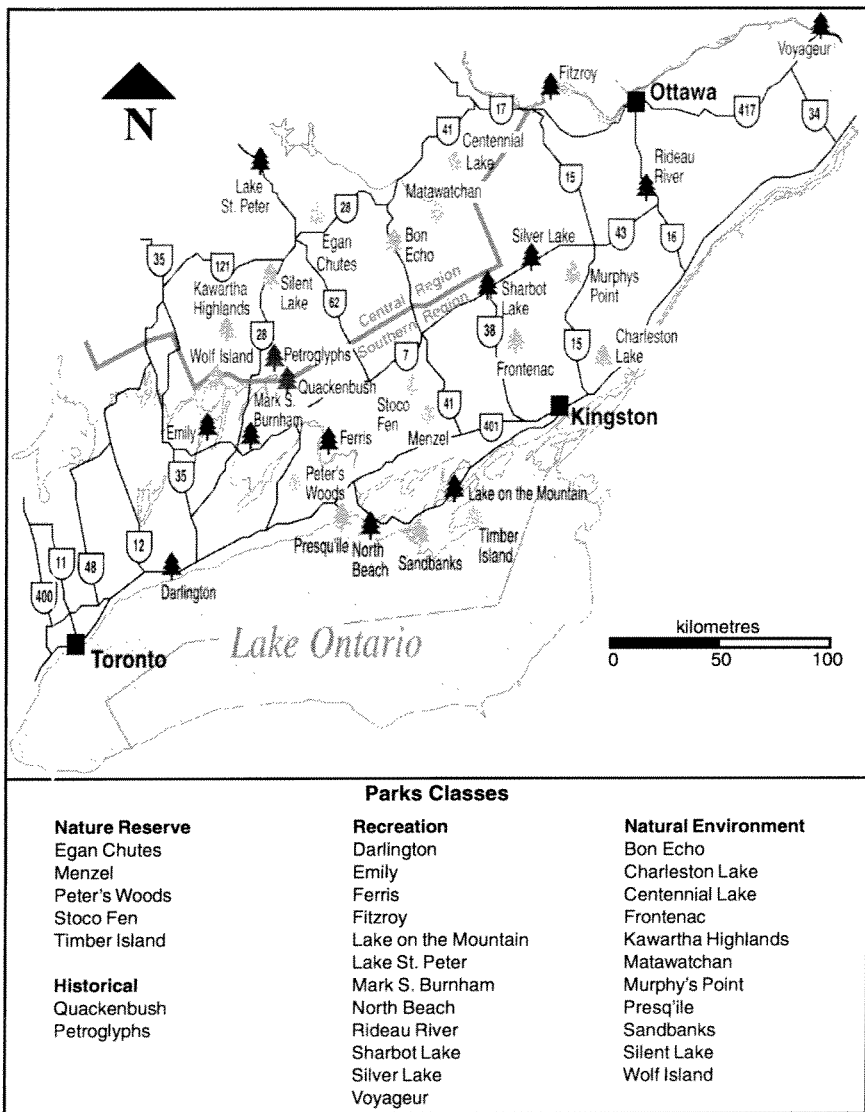


Figure 3: Provincial Parks in Southeast Zone

and Charleston Lake. These parks offer a diverse range of recreational opportunities, including over sixty interpretive and recreational trails. In 1998, more than 240,000 visitors to Southeastern Zone parks used trails for recreation or natural and/or cultural interpretation (Ontario Parks 1998).

In order to determine if the trails in the zone parks were representative of their park's respective natural and cultural heritage themes, and in turn contributing towards a thematically balanced zone trail system, an inventory of each park's

themes and trails was conducted. Twenty-one parks, primarily the zone's operating parks, were studied and an inventory of each park's trails was conducted. This information was derived from each park's management plan and NHE plan. Two types of trails were distinguished, interpretive trails, which have some form of interpretive signage and/or guided hikes, and recreational trails, which are longer in distance and primarily self-guided. Recreational trails are primarily used for hiking, with cross country skiing, cycling and mountain biking being other uses of trails in the zone parks.

In total, 68 trails were inventoried, 27 interpretive and 41 recreational trails. The 21 parks were representative of 81 natural and cultural heritage themes, 40 (or 49%) of these themes were represented by trails (Table 1).

To summarize, it is evident that only half of the Southeastern zone's park themes are represented by park trails. Granted that trails may not always be the best means of interpreting a natural or cultural heritage resource or theme. This study provides a basis for future interpretive and recreational trail planning in the Southeastern Zone.

Park	Number of Park Themes	Number of Trails	Interpretive Trails	Recreation Trails	Represented Themes by Trails
Bon Echo	8	5	3	2	4
Charleston Lake	5	7	4	3	4
Darlington	5	4	2	2	4
Ferris	4	1	0	1	1
Fitzroy	4	2	1	1	2
Frontenac	2	12	2	10	2
Lake on the Mountain	4	1	0	1	0
Lake St. Peter	3	2	0	2	1
Mark S. Burnham	3	1	0	1	1
Murphys Point	3	7	5	2	5
North Beach	1	0	0	0	0
Peter's Woods PNR	2	2	1	1	1
Petroglyphs	2	4	1	3	1
Presqu'île	7	6	3	3	3
Rideau River	5	1	0	1	1
Sandbanks	6	1	1	0	2
Sharbot Lake	3	2	1	1	2
Silent Lake	3	4	0	4	1
Silver Lake	1	1	0	1	1
Voyageur	7	3	1	2	2
Total	81	68	27	41	40

Table 1: Represented Themes by Trails in Southeastern Zone Provincial Parks

Regional Trail Strategy

Ontario Parks trails in Southeastern Zone parks are only a small fraction of the total regional trail network. There are three regional trails that pass through provincial parks in the Southeastern Zone. They include:

- Rideau Trail (Kingston to Ottawa, passing through Frontenac and Murphys Point Provincial Parks);
- Waterfront Trail (Oshawa to Trenton, passing through Darlington and Presqu'île Provincial Parks); and,
- Hastings County Heritage Trail (Glen Ross to Lake St. Peter Provincial Park).

Other significant trails that are situated in the Southeastern Zone are the Ganaraska Trail, Oak Ridges Trail, and several sections of the Trans-Canada Trail.

In moving towards a trail systems plan for the Southeastern Zone parks, there are three areas that require further planning:

- defining strategic trail routes (e.g. Lake Ontario, Rideau Waterway, Kawartha, Haliburton and Madawaska Highlands and Ottawa River Valley);
- establishing partnerships in planning and managing trails (e.g. Parks Canada, Cataraqui Region Conservation Authority, Friends of Provincial Parks, Waterfront Regeneration Trust, Kingston Field Naturalists and Cataraqui Trail Alliance); and,
- assessing ecological corridors to include trails (e.g. Algonquin to Adirondacks Conservation Initiative, Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS)).

Conclusion

This paper has noted that:

- while numerous recreation trails have been developed and are well used in Ontario, notably in provincial parks, this has largely been done on an *ad hoc* basis resulting in an inadequate system of trails to meet future needs in parks and throughout the province;
- various recent problems, opportunities, and initiatives make a more coordinated approach to planning, developing, managing and funding trails in provincial parks and Ontario desirable;
- such coordinated planning will require various actions, including trail inventories, a G.I.S. for trails, trail gap analysis, recognition of a province-wide hierarchy of trails, trail user surveys, and a matching of the demand for, and supply of trails;
- current trails in Ontario Parks' Southeastern Zone only represent half of park themes; and,
- the systematic planning, development and management of trails would also be assisted by the development of a Provincial Trails Policy, more comprehensive planning of trails in and between provincial parks, greater recognition of the tourism value of trails, continued leadership by the Ontario Trails Council, and increased funding and research.

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